"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Religious Situation in the Rural-Urban Fringe

By Samuel W. Blizzard*

The rural-urban fringe, as distinguished from the suburban town, is largely a product of the automobile age. The search for freedom from noise and dirt, high taxes and crowding, and often a desire for a feeling of security in having "one foot on the land" are leading many to establish residences outside the city limits where they feel these advantages are to be obtained.

The tide of moving populations seems to be an irresistible one, as Kimball describes it. It sweeps in and through old communities. It engulfs farm after farm, breaking up rural neighborhoods that have had decades of stability. It turns quiet villages which have preserved their numbers and institutions for many decades into places with problems that those who have spent their lives there find they are unable to understand or cope with. One may find a new development on last year's potato field or this spring's spinach patch!

A PROBLEM AREA

There are many problems which thousands of human beings create as they get established in a new area. Most difficulties arise from the attempt to carry out a distinctively new social life without the benefit of regulated controls and facilities.

Country stores are overwhelmed by new customers. Theaters, hospitals, post offices, and libraries that formerly served small, trade-centered, rural communities are overflowing with patrons. Schools are bulging with new students. Housing becomes scarce, even though building may be going on at a fantastic rate. Real estate values rise suddenly so that the farmer feels he cannot afford to cultivate his land.

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* Condensed from an address given at the National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country, Columbus, Ohio, October 30, 1952. Dr. Blizzard is Administrative Director of the Social Science Research Center and Associate Professor of Sociology and Rural Sociology at Pennsylvania State College. He is one of our most active students in this field, and we are happy to share his thinking with members of The Christian Rural Fellowship. -- I.W.M.

The fringe development is like an army that has outrun its supply lines. It needs to have water, gas, and electric lines extended; highways widened to care for increased traffic and to abolish transportation bottlenecks; and new schools and churches built. An area that was a plowed field a year ago can hardly sprout such services suddenly.

The checkered, heterogeneous, and overlapping governmental set-up in the suburban areas often is not able to meet these demands. The township commissioner or the burgess of a small town is not experienced in providing such service. They have been known to purposefully set up obstacles to fringe development.

A NEW TYPE OF SOCIETY

People who move to the fringe come from two directions--from the country and from the city. By previous residence the fringe dweller may be urban-oriented or rural-oriented. This tends to make it difficult to develop a community spirit.

The movement of people to the outskirts of the city has meant that a new type of society is evolving in the United States. In the past we have thought of American life being divided into rural and urban society. Each of these has its own distinctive pattern of living. Fringe society has taken certain features of both rural and urban life and has welded them into its own type of culture. Fringe people are not merely reduplicating patterns of urban living in the new environment. The desire to live in the fringe grows out of the failure of the modern urban industrial world to provide for its members the kind of satisfactions which as human beings they want for themselves and their families.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Population studies reveal that residents of the fringe have several unique social characteristics. Usually the households contain a larger number of people than do those in the city. The proportion of young people under twenty-one is greater in the fringe than it is in the city. There is a greater proportion of people in the productive years of life living in the fringe than on the farm. There are fewer old people living in the fringe than in either the rural or urban areas generally.

The fringe is an area of "normal" families. They are more likely to have a male head and to consist of husband, wife, and child (or children) than do metropolitan households. Broken homes are found less frequently in the fringe. The heads of households in the rural-urban zone are younger than those in other residential areas. These families consist more frequently of those that are in the early stages of the family cycle than do city homes. Homes in which there are children of school age are also found in a higher proportion of cases. Fringe dwellers tend to be home owners.

The socio-economic status of suburban town residents and rural-urban fringe householders differs greatly. In a study of the rural-urban fringe surrounding Pittsburgh researchers at Pennsylvania State College found that residents of suburban towns were typically from the higher brackets of white-collar workers. The male head of a household in the rural-urban fringe was more frequently a skilled worker. In greater Pittsburgh the extent of formal education was highest for those living in suburban towns. They reported higher incomes

than those of other areas in greater Pittsburgh and were high participators in voluntary associations. As measured by their housing, education, occupations, incomes, and level of living, residents of suburban towns in greater Pittsburgh have high socio-economic status. Residents of the rural-urban fringe do not seem to have as much status as their neighbors in suburban towns or in the metropolitan city.

REASONS FOR MOVING TO THE FRINGE

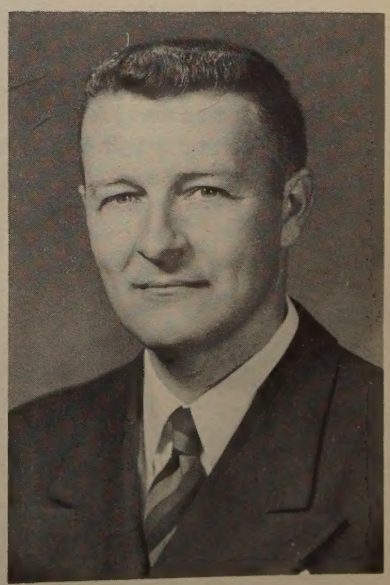
What reasons lead people to move to the fringe? First, the automobile has released men from living in areas where they are dependent upon public transportation and timetables. Second, the availability of desirable housing in the city is becoming increasingly limited. Residence in the fringe is one of the alternative opportunities for overcoming urban crowdedness.

Often economy is a strong motive in fringe residence. Part-time farming for industrial workers offers an opportunity to supplement the family income. One study of part-time farming in six western Pennsylvania industrial areas demonstrates the value of supplementary income. During the late depression years industrial workers in these areas received 45¢ an hour. The hourly value of their farm work, calculated by the usual farm management methods, was 13¢ an hour. The economic value that the blue-collar family receives from rural fringe living is more important in cheaper food and housing than supplementary income.

DEVELOPING A PROGRAM

The professional leader who is developing a program in a fringe community often finds that normal organizational methods are not effective. One of the complicating factors is the highly heterogeneous nature of fringe society. This was illustrated by the Vale neighborhood of Fairfax County, Virginia, in 1948. Here, twenty miles from Washington, of the eighty-six principle breadwinners forty-four followed different kinds of work as their primary occupation, including a retired admiral, dog catcher, streetcar operator, dairy farmer, U.S. Department of Agriculture employees, national magazine artist, attorneys, carpenters, U.S. diplomat, etc. The standard of living was high. Over one-third of those over ten years of age did not participate in any organization during the previous year.

A similar problem is presented to religious leaders who wish to minister to newcomers in a newly-established fringe community. When people come from varied social backgrounds, their problems cannot often be solved by group action. Ways of meeting religious needs successful in established communities may not apply.



Samuel W. Blizzard

RURAL-URBAN CONFLICT

Fringe areas are the focal point for rural-urban conflicts. Individuals whose basic needs are not satisfied by city or rural life apparently select home sites in the fringe. And because the fringe appears to be the depository for an unsatisfied element in our population, the residents are often individuals trying to shape a more acceptable pattern of living different from

the status quo orientation of big cities. People with a provincial small-town outlook must mix with urbanites who look at things from the point of view of the "big city." The new residents will want to see the old rural community move toward achievement of urban goals and adopt urban standards of conduct. Often the new settlers are democratically jumbled with the old residents. Their different ways of finding satisfactions in life and their varying sources of income may mean a minimum of social interaction between old-timers and newcomers. Often the main thing they have in common is the use of business facilities in town.

FINDING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

Does the fringe meet the hopes of its residents? The answer to this question, Kimball suggests, is based upon motivations and expectations and will vary with the individual. Just as there are disappointments, so also are there achievements. The fringe presents new opportunities of which many will take advantage. New populations moving into the fringe bring forth new needs which those with initiative may capitalize upon.

Those who wish to establish patterns of human organization in the fringe will help new residents formulate their own social purposes and take such community and political action as they require. To create a sense of community living, religious or secular professional leaders will be forced to discover the items of common interest that seem to add so much to family and individual living.

ADJUSTING ESTABLISHED ORGANIZATIONS TO NEW NEEDS

There is no proof that established groups are uniformly extending the hand of welcome or integrating the newcomers into community life. Old-timers and newcomers come together in cooperative economic, social, and civic relations very slowly. Newcomers find themselves outside established relations which bind people into a neighborhood. If they come to the fringe seeking the neighborly life of farmer and village resident, they face frustration.

Kimball found that in the fringe it is apparently not easy for newcomers to make themselves acceptable. The core of the membership in lodges, clubs, and churches, as well as in political groups, goes back a long time. It is this group which controls in large measure the life of the community. Accordingly it is also the group which either does or does not provide the leadership which integrates newcomers into its activities.

TECHNIQUES FOR ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY LIFE

In order to establish a religious program in the fringe we need to understand how and know the techniques for building (or rebuilding) a community. It would appear to be more important to know the power and prestige groups and how they make their influence felt than it would be to know where the community boundaries are or how many organizations there are in the community. When new population groups begin to disturb the existing social structures and to establish new social systems, the vested interests of the old community are challenged The established community will use all of its power to stymie any new enterprises Conflicts, therefore, may arise in the process of community rebuilding. Religious leaders who wish to establish programs adapted to the needs of fringe residents will need to know how to use conflict constructively in the achievement of a desirable community goal.

One of the community organization problems of the fringe is the need for a focal point of activity. When new homes are scattered indiscriminately in an old open country neighborhood and a fringe society begins to evolve, there is often no adequate center in which the social activities can take place. One of the institutions that has an advantage in the fringe is the high school. Many schools adjust to new fringe developments more readily than other social institutions because American people place a high value on education. New fringe residents are highly vocal when the educational system is not adequate to provide training for their children. Also, in most states the political structure is adjustable to changing educational requirements. It is much easier to get a bond issue authorized for the building of a new school than it is to conduct a financial campaign to underwrite the construction of a new community building, club house, or church. Planners who are interested in enlarging the organizational structure and program in a fringe community find that the high school is an excellent place in which to centralize their program. It offers facilities about which individuals have an open-minded attitude.

One of the hasty and easy conclusions that religious workers arrive at concerning the fringe is that there are no community leaders. If they mean that there are no formally recognized leaders, they may be justified in this observation. However, any group that is thrown together will begin to evolve its own social organization and an informal leadership structure will gradually be established. The clergymen who are seeking to meet the religious needs of the fringe will be successful to the extent that they tie in with this seemingly unorganized and informal leadership structure.

Training local leaders in a fringe community is the same as it is in a more firmly-established community. Leaders are those who see the direction in which a group wishes to go, who vocalize the desires of the group, and who persuade the group to move toward fulfillment of their goals. Selecting leaders for program building in the new fringe community is a matter of choosing people who have a personal involvement in the values that they wish to achieve.

A RELIGIOUS PROGRAM FOR THE FRINGE

That churches grow as their communities prosper is a rule of thumb that religious researchers follow. Generally speaking, churches reflect the social desirability of their community. If this is true, then churchmen need to direct their programs and pastoral ministries toward the goal of adapting themselves to the specific needs of their environments. A church in the fringe should attempt to make itself locally essential and indigenous. The program of a fringe church should have more of the character of a religious community helping itself to be a better community.

This seems to suggest that the religious needs of newcomers in a fringe area are quite specific. Churches that wish to survive or prosper in this type of community must be prepared to serve the new as well as the old resident. The officers and leaders of the churches must be sensitive to the unique needs of the new residents. The traditional ecclesiastical approach may be effective in some communities, but in many areas in the rural-urban fringe it has already failed.

The church that wishes to serve people in the suburban areas must be prepared to participate in the processes that build a community. Devices that are not often used by church leaders may need to be employed. Awareness of community needs and a desire to help meet them will make any church organization a

wanted and serving part of the life of the people. Early discussions about unmet needs in one community may center around a sports program. In another it may be the need for fire or police protection. Wherever and whatever the need, be it religious or secular, the church that wishes to serve fringe people must participate in meeting the need.

NEWCOMERS MAY REJECT FRINGE CHURCHES

There is considerable evidence that "city people" reject fringe churches on the grounds that their needs cannot be met in these churches. In Webster, New York, Koos and Brunner report that the Protestant churches failed to minister to or enlist the interest of the immigrating population. The community's distrust of "city people," that is, of their religious values and moral attitudes operated to prevent acceptance of newcomers by farm families. This resulted in some measure in the subtle and perhaps unconscious discouragement of their attendance at church services.

Kimball, commenting on the Toledo, Ohio, fringe, noted the conservative control of old-timers within the church. The attempts of a new minister to bring new interests to the young people were frowned upon. Those who were progressive complained that an old and outdated theology was still dominant. He observed that this may not be true of one or two of the newer churches. The practice of the faith may be somewhat noisy and the sermons described as hysterical, but some of the newer people have flocked to them.

FRINGE CHURCH PARISH PATTERNS

Several metropolitan city church surveys have revealed that central cities are increasingly coming under the religious influence of the Catholic Church. Peripheral areas tend to be settled by people of the Protestant religious tradition. It appears, therefore, that the fringe areas are largely the religious responsibility of the Protestant groups.

The church that wishes to plant itself in the fringe area should rediscover the value of and the techniques for developing the primary group--the small intimate, face-to-face group described by Cooley. It would appear that this would offer churchmen a unique opportunity to evolve a new sense of Christian fellowship. By capitalizing on the potentials for fellowship that the primary group offers, small groups of people may meet in homes for the exercise of such apostolic gifts as prayer, Bible reading, and testimony. In doing this they will be very close to the apostolic tradition as we see it described in the book of The Acts.

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